



# Paying for Sex During COVID-19 Pandemic: The Experiences of Israeli Men

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## Abstract

**Introduction** This qualitative study explored the experiences of men who pay women for sex (MWPWS) during the COVID-19 pandemic, which poses radical and profound challenges to various aspects of people's intimate, sexual, and financial experiences.

**Methods** The study was based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 Israeli MWPWS who regularly visit various prostitution venues. The interviews were conducted between April and July 2020, between the first and the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic in Israel.

**Results** The findings focus on four major aspects of the participants' experiences: the participants' inability to pay for sex, the difficulties imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic to participants' sex-for-pay experiences, the positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their sex-for-pay experiences, and the insignificance of COVID-19 pandemic to their sex-for-pay experiences.

**Conclusions** I conclude that COVID-19 pandemic triggers various sexual, emotional, and gendered experiences for MWPWS. Accordingly, MWPWS may reevaluate their engagement in sex-for-pay, and their experiences of it may be reshaped in light of the pandemic. I discuss the findings' contribution to sexuality and masculinity studies, and the methodological possibilities that they raise for qualitative scholars studying social phenomena during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Policy Implications** The study highlights the significance of developing ad hoc prostitution policy that supports the individuals involved in the sex industry—both MWPWS and the women who are paid for sex—during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it suggests that prostitution policy should address the diverse experiences of MWPWS, beyond viewing them as merely offenders who should be punished, or re-educated.

**Keywords** COVID-19 pandemic · Men who pay for sex · Sex for pay · Prostitution policy · Sex industry

## Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 (also known as the *novel coronavirus*) as a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic (CP) affects the lives of millions (and millions more to come) throughout the world. Besides its severe health implications, the public health measures imposed in an effort to prevent the pandemic from spreading sparked an unprecedented economic crisis (Zhang et al., 2020), and distinctly changed social behavior and interpersonal human interactions (Ward, 2020). The enforced social distancing—arising from the

movement restrictions and quarantines—discourage physical intimacy, especially between people who do not reside together (Lopes et al., 2020; Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020). Therefore, due to the risk of being infected with COVID-19 through sexual relations (Cipriano et al., 2020), the social distancing, and the economic crisis, the lives and activities of the individuals involved in the sex industry are likely to be affected by the pandemic.

In recent months, journalistic and opinion pieces in mainstream media have highlighted the challenges the sex industry is facing during CP (Callander et al., 2020; Döring, 2020). These articles have mostly discussed the financial hardship of women who are paid for sex (WPS) as they are forced out of work and are usually excluded from financial support packages that are offered to individuals and business during CP. Sex workers' organizations have also stressed the immediate need to financially assist and support sex

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workers who are left without resources to sustain themselves (ICRSE, 2020; Scarlet Alliance, 2020). Notwithstanding these publications, to date, only a few empirical studies have examined the impacts of CP on the populations involved in sex-for-pay (SFP) (i.e., Amdeslassie et al., 2020; Gichuna et al., 2020). Furthermore, my review has failed to find even a single publication—academic or otherwise—about the effects of CP on men who pay women for sex (MWPWS).

Nonetheless, the substantive empirical (pre-CP) body of knowledge about MWPWS suggests that there are many aspects to the SFP experiences of MWPWS—such as their sexual desires (Huysamen, 2019), their intimate relations (Sanders, 2008), their consumerist behavior (Lahav-Raz, 2019c), their recreational habits and leisure patterns (Prior & Peled, 2019), and their health risk behaviors (Shilo & Mor, 2019). All of these have been profoundly affected by CP and its attendant social regulations—indicating that the current context of a global pandemic is highly relevant to the experiences of MWPWS. For example, MWPWS may be forced to reduce their consumption of sex for fear of being infected, or due to movement restrictions, social distancing, or economic hardship. Furthermore, the interruption of men's daily routine and changes in their SFP habits may also trigger different emotional and sexual experiences for MWPWS.

Accordingly, the present study set out to explore the SFP experiences of Israeli MWPWS during CP—both in terms of their actual experiences of SFP (or lack thereof), and in terms of their feelings about those experiences. I argue that the experiences of MWPWS were impacted by CP in various, and even contradicting, ways. While CP prevented some men from paying for sex, it was also insignificant to the SFP experiences of other MWPWS. Moreover, the changes that CP enforced on the SFP experiences of MWPWS triggered both negative and positive sexual and emotional experiences for them.

The following review will discuss the (pre-CP) academic literature concerning the experiences of MWPWS, as well as the (mostly) non-empirical literature about the presumed, and actual effects CP has on individuals' sexual, intimate, and consumerist experiences. Finally, the Israeli context of prostitution and SFP is discussed.

### The Experiences of MWPWS

A recent systematic review of the qualitative literature about MWPWS suggests that their diverse experiences are at once gendered, sexual, intimate, consumerist, and related to power relations, and social stigma (Prior & Peled, [submitted for publication B](#)). Thus, for example, studies show that SFP enables MWPWS to fulfill their sexual desires (Huysamen, 2019), and boost their sense of masculinity (Hammond & van Hooff, 2019; Lahav-Raz, 2019a). However, other studies

have found that MWPWS may also experience a sense of compromised sexual potency and flawed masculinity when paying for sex (Prior & Peled, 2019). The literature also shows that while some MWPWS engage in SFP to experience intimacy and relieve their loneliness (Birch, 2015; Jones & Hannem, 2018); others describe their SFP experiences as purely consumerist episodes, in which they seek to maximize their gain (Lahav-Raz, 2019c). MWPWS might also establish a powerful socio-cultural position through their SFP experiences (Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2018). Finally, due to the social stigma surrounding the sex industry (Pitcher, 2019; Weitzer, 2018), the SFP experiences of MWPWS are often concealed and involve their attempts to neutralize or normalize their actions (Lim & Cheah, 2020).

The diverse experiences of MWPWS also vary within different venues of the sex industry or based on different SFP patterns. Thus, for example, sex tourism in developing countries is often characterized by open-ended and enduring relationships between sex tourists and local WPS, which seldom facilitates intimate experiences for MWPWS (Bishop & Limmer, 2018; Prior & Peled, 2019). However, street-based SFP is usually referred to by MWPWS in straightforward terms of strictly sexual experiences (Durant & Couch, 2019). Moreover, some MWPWS prefer to become regular clients of a specific woman, whom they pay for sex in indoor settings (Sanders, 2008)—while other MWPWS enjoy the rush and excitement of switching between multiple WPS at varying locations (Plantin, 2020).

All of these elements—such as the sexual and emotional desires of MWPWS and their preferred SFP relations and locations—shape their SFP experiences, and are likely to be affected by CP and its attendant restrictions.

### Sexuality, Intimacy, Consumerism, and SFP During CP

Since the CP is an ongoing crisis, the empirical body of knowledge about it is still unestablished, and we lack an understanding of the effects the pandemic has had on individuals' interpersonal and intimate experiences. However, preliminary studies and commentary suggest that people's sexual, intimate, and consumerist experiences will be strongly shaped by CP, both tangibly and substantively. Accordingly, it is safe to assume that the SFP experiences of MWPWS will also be shaped by the context of CP.

Firstly, the health risks and social-distancing measures—in particular, the lockdown and quarantines—may concretely disrupt the ability of MWPWS to pay for sex. Even if MWPWS decide to put themselves at risk by breaking the social-distancing restrictions and engage in SFP, they may struggle to find SFP venues—locally, or overseas—that operate as usual (Döring, 2020). However, online arenas of SFP can still be fully active, and indeed, a recent report from

Italy has found that at one of the largest porn and SFP Web sites, there was a major drop in ads for offline prostitution during the first weeks of CP, and a notable increase in ads for online prostitution (webcam prostitution) (Cipolla, 2020). Hence, it is possible that MWPWS change their patterns of SFP during CP and engage in different types of SFP.

Findings of preliminary surveys of individuals' sexual behavior and emotional experiences during CP are also relevant to the present study. A recent self-reported and non-representative Chinese survey found that about a quarter of participants reported a decline in sexual desire, and about a third reported a decrease in the frequency of their sexual acts during quarantine (Li et al., 2020). Conversely, in a similar survey conducted in Italy, over 40% of the participants self-reported increased sexual desires during quarantine (Cocci et al., 2020). Moreover, in a recent study on the sexual behavior of Israeli men who have sex with men during CP, participants reported limiting their sexual repertoire—in particular, by avoiding kissing—and reducing their involvement in SFP (as sellers and as buyers) (Shilo & Mor, 2020). These findings suggest that CP may have different impacts on people's sexual desires and sexual activities.

Furthermore, research commentaries suggest that individuals' quest for intimacy may intensify during CP, as they may feel lonelier due to the social isolation (Luiggi-Hernández & Rivera-Amador, 2020). However, the forced isolation can be experienced as peaceful, thereby reducing the need for inter-personal intimacy (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). Scholars have also argued that consumerism patterns can dramatically change during CP—especially in sectors involving personal contact and social consumption (i.e., consumption that brings people together, such as leisure activities) (Wren-Lewis, 2020). Thus, for example, face-to-face consumerism might be replaced with online consumerism (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020).

Overall, as the threatening virus limits individuals' social and intimate interactions and the economic crisis deepens, it is reasonable to assume that the SFP experiences of MWPWS will be reshaped during CP. Accordingly, this study is one of the first to empirically explore the SFP experiences of MWPWS during CP. Finally, since the present study focuses on Israeli MWPWS, a discussion of the distinctive characteristics of the Israeli context of SFP and the timeline of CP in Israel, are required.

### The Israeli Context of Prostitution and SFP

Recent surveys based on representative samples of approximately 1000 Israeli men (each) found that 20% to 30% of Israeli men have paid for sex at least once (Shilo et al., 2020; Shilo & Mor, 2019), and 16% reported having paid for sex on multiple occasions (Shilo et al., 2020). Respondents who have paid for sex mostly defined themselves as secular (as

opposed to religious or ultra-Orthodox), and no differences were found between them and those who have not paid for sex in terms of age, income, education levels, marital status, or number of children. Overall, MWPWS cited diverse reasons for paying for sex, but most commonly, it was that SFP is a type of recreational activity (Shilo et al., 2020). In light of this finding and other recreational activities that have been disrupted by CP, the SFP experiences of Israeli MWPWS are likely to have been affected by CP.

Sociocultural perceptions and recent legal changes in SFP policy in Israel are an important context for this study. Prostitution itself is highly stigmatized in Israeli society—as evident from Israeli cultural, political, academic, and media discourses on the topic (Almog, 2010; Peled et al., 2020). In recent years, the radical feminist prostitution-is-harmful narrative has had a noticeable impact on both public and professional discourse (Lahav-Raz, 2019b). However, scholars suggest that the Israeli public's support for and outright ban of SFP and prostitution mostly stems from conservative and religious outlooks, as opposed to radical feminist ones (Shilo et al., 2020).

Indeed, following a public campaign led by radical feminist activists in collaboration with conservative and Jewish Orthodox political figures, in 2018, the Israeli parliament (the “Knesset”) passed a law that prohibits the purchase of sexual services, and penalizes those who do so. Despite the objections of Israeli sex workers—with the backing of social activists, social workers, and jurists (Levy-Aronovic et al., 2020)—this law went into effect on July 10, 2020. Thus, data for this study was collected on the eve of the criminalization of MWPWS and against a backdrop of fierce public debate, which depicted both paying and being paid for sex as deviant behaviors, and paying for sex as abusive.

### CP in Israel: April to July, 2020

The first case of COVID-19 in Israel was diagnosed at late February; thereafter, the virus spread rapidly throughout the country (Hilai & Alon, 2020, February 27). Thanks to the government's quick response (Maor et al., 2020), by mid-April, the daily number of recovering persons was higher than the number of new infections. However, the number of new infections rose again in late May (Linder & Datal, 2020, May 29), and by July, the second wave of CP was in full force.

As in other parts of the world, Israel enforced public-health measures in an effort to stop the virus from spreading, by isolating infected people and interrupting the transmission (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020). Since March 2020, infected individuals in Israel were isolated and separated from non-infected persons, people who were presumed to have been exposed to infected persons were also obliged to self-isolate, face masks became obligatory, and social

distancing was enforced in the wider community through various means, such as a ban on large-scale gatherings. Between mid-March and late April, the entire country was in lockdown, and everyone were forced into quarantine and forbidden from leaving home, except for securing vital supplies (Ichner & Zagrizak, 2020, April 19; Landau et al., 2020, March 25). During the last week of April 2020, the lockdown slowly eased, and public businesses gradually resumed operations, with certain restrictions, such as obligatory facemasks. Unfortunately, the return to normal activity proved to be premature, and by June and July 2020, certain towns were forced back into movement restrictions (Ma'ariv Online, 2020, June 26), and public activities were once again limited (Yeretzki & Cohen, 2020, July 7).

In light of these constraints, the participants in the present study were interviewed about their SFP experiences between the first and the second wave of CP: soon after the lockdown was eased, and throughout the confusing period of constantly changing social restrictions.

## Method

This naturalistic qualitative study was based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, aimed at capturing the participants' experiences of paying for sex during CP. The naturalistic framework assumes that realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic, and that knowledge is bound to specific time and context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This framework is suited for a preliminary exploration of little researched experiences, such as those of MWPWS during CP. In keeping with the naturalistic tradition, the present study was descriptive in nature, and the analysis was not theoretically-driven, nor did it apply a hermeneutic approach to interpretive analysis (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). As a researcher, my main goal was to encourage participants to tell their story, to understand it in its complexity, and to faithfully convey this complexity (Patton, 1990).

## Population and Participants

All the participants were recruited as part of a larger ongoing qualitative study that focuses on the identity construction of MWPWS. Although sex is sold and bought by people of every gender and sexual identity, it is still mostly cisgender men buy sex from cisgender women (Mac & Smith, 2018). Furthermore, as Mac and Smith argue, people's experiences in the sex trade are usually shaped within hegemonic norms of sexuality and gender, thus suggesting that buying sex from women might be fundamentally different than buying sex from men. Accordingly, the present study is limited to *men* who pay *women* for sex. Israeli adult MWPWS were initially

invited to take part in a study on the meanings they ascribe to their engagement in SFP through (1) Facebook groups and Facebook ads, (2) ads at STD community clinics, (3) therapists specializing in treating sex addiction and sexual dysfunction, (4) the informal *Israeli Johns School* (a hotline for men who pay for sex that is run by volunteers), (5) personal acquaintance, and (6) snowball sampling. Of the 23 MWPWS who took part in the original study, 13 stated that they regularly and actively pay for sex. I invited these men to attend follow-up interviews about their SFP experiences during CP. Ten of them agreed, and were interviewed for the present study. I sought to gain a real-time look into the experiences of MWPWS, and to avoid a protracted recruitment process in what subsequently turned out to be only the beginning of a prolonged and ongoing global crisis. Therefore, due to the difficulty of recruiting MWPWS to take part in studies (Huysamen, 2019), I approached participants whom I had recently already interviewed. Coincidentally, all the participants in the present study were initially recruited through Facebook groups and Facebook ads.

The participants were 10 Israeli men who regularly paid women for sex. Their average age was 38.6 (range 22–53). Eight of them were born in Israel, and two had immigrated to it at a young age from the Soviet Union. All the participants were of Jewish secular background, except one who was Jewish Orthodox. Three were university-educated, and six worked at jobs that require vocational training. Three participants were married or in a long-term relationship, one was divorced, and six were single. Five participants had children.

All of the participants were in Israel during CP—except one who was traveling in Vietnam. In terms of living arrangements, two participants resided with their parents, two participants lived with their wives and children, one had his children living with him part-time, one resided at a hostel with his SFP partner, and the remaining four lived alone. Five participants were unemployed at the time of the interview due to CP—the rest were still working in their full-time jobs. Three participants had been paying for sex for 2 or 3 years before CP; the rest had been doing so for over a decade before. The participants had paid for sex in various settings—including indoor brothels, strip clubs, sex tourism, massage parlors, and street-based venues.

## Data Collection and Data Analysis

I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with all the participants. All of the interviews were follow-up interviews and conducted approximately 1 to 5 months after the original ones. The interviews in the present study started with a general open question: "I am interested in your experience of SFP during this time of CP." It then

continued, using the interview protocol flexibly, with the aim of covering the following topics: the participants' considerations for paying for sex (or abstaining from it) during CP—with particular focus on health, financial, sexual, and emotional considerations; their sex consumption patterns during CP—with particular questions about transferring to online SFP; their relationships with WPS and other MWPWS during CP; and their perceptions of the short- and long-term impact of CP on their SFP experiences, and on the sex industry as a whole—particularly in Israel.

Participants were interviewed through video calls (using Zoom or Skype) ( $n = 5$ ), by the telephone ( $n = 4$ ), and through text messaging ( $n = 1$ ). The interviews took place between April and July 2020, and lasted, on average, around 45 min (between 35 and 70 min). Since I had previous acquaintance with the participants, the interviews were characterized with a friendly atmosphere, and usually did not require a long “warm-up” before “diving” into the conversation. However, technical disruptions that often characterize online communication sometime impaired the flow of the interview. Thus, alongside its advantages, the interrupted nature of online interviews is a factor that qualitative interviewers should prepare for and adapt to, especially in light of the growing popularity of this type of communication in the era of CP.

Data analysis was conducted in accordance with the stages proposed by Strauss & Corbin (1998), using MAXQDA 2020 software. First, the transcripts were coded, through open and in vivo coding techniques, to identify themes and concepts, and to enable decomposition of initial schemes. The themes concerned the participants' actual experiences in SFP during CP; their motivations to pay for sex, or to abstain from doing so, during CP; the differences and similarities between their pre-CP SFP experiences and their present SFP experiences during CP; their sexual, emotional, and financial experiences in abstaining from SFP; and their perceptions of the CP's impacts on their current and future experiences as MWPWS, on MWPWS in general, on the local and global sex industry, and on Israeli prostitution policy and its enforcement. The resulting codes were then grouped and regrouped through axial coding, until a final classification of 20 key categories was reached. The interview transcripts were then re-coded into the key categories. Each key category was analyzed separately to gain a complex and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences, until a broader organizing framework of the findings was conceptualized that was deemed to faithfully represent the participants' experiences. Complementary data from the original interviews about the participants' pre-CP experiences of SFP was then added, to better contextualize and situate the analysis.

## Positionality

As a novice scholar who has been studying MWPWS for several years now, I see paying for sex as a complicated social phenomenon, and reject binary definitions of its impact and meaning. I believe the experiences of MWPWS involve multiple facets—such as sexuality, gender norms, intimacy, consumerism patterns, and stigma-related behavior. I also espouse a constructivist perspective, and therefore believe that the participants' SFP experiences are likely to be shaped by the present context of CP, as well as by the changing Israeli legal status, that now criminalizes their actions.

Previous studies of MWPWS suggest that they often attempt to maintain a respectable and non-deviant image—especially when being interviewed by female scholars, whom they perceive to be judgmental and critical of MWPWS (Prior & Peled, [submitted for publication A](#); Huysamen, 2016). This was evident in the present study, as the participants were eager to maintain a normative identity, given they all stated that they assume that, as an upper-middle class and university-educated young woman, I probably support the upcoming policy that criminalizes their actions. Perhaps this led some participants to omit certain stories that might portray them as coercive, abusive, or violent. Nonetheless, unlike previous studies in which MWPWS were restrained in their sexual descriptions (Prior & Peled, 2019), the participants in the present study were rather explicit and detailed about their sexual experiences. Despite my position as an *outsider* (Pillow, 2003) with no previous experiences in the sex industry, my prior acquaintance with the participants, and the sense of a “shared experience” (Berger, 2015) of the common reality of a global pandemic, appeared to have fostered a comfortable and intimate conversation.

## Ethical Considerations and Quality Criteria

This study was approved by the IRB of Tel Aviv University. In line with the ethical tenet of *Do no harm* (Peled & Leichtentritt, 2002), I emphasized to the participants that they could terminate their participation at any time, or refuse to answer certain questions, without any adverse consequences. Moreover, due to the unusual conditions of CP, which often disrupted participants' privacy, I made exceptional efforts to comply with participants' schedule and their preferred interview method (video calls, phone calls, or text messages). In addition, a debriefing conversation was held at the end of each interview. None of the participants reported any distress, and most of them remarked that the atmosphere in the interviews was respectful, and appeared grateful for the opportunity to share their experiences, especially in times of enforced social isolation. Particular care was taken to maintain the confidentiality of the participants' identities,

by omitting or changing all identifying details as early as the transcription stage.

The study's credibility was promoted by encouraging participants to express themselves openly during the interviews; by ensuring accurate and complete transcription of the interviews; and by the effort to enable a complex and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences, in light of the context in which they were shaped. The dependability of the findings was facilitated through vigilance against undue influences of my personal views, and through my critical reflective observation, as described above (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Findings

The participants' experiences of SFP during CP featured four major common experiential themes: (1) CP prevents them from paying for sex, (2) CP imposes sexual, emotional, and financial difficulties on MWPWS, (3) CP positively changes the SFP experiences of MWPWS, and (4) CP had little impact on the SFP experiences of MWPWS. The themes address both participants' experiences of paying for sex and abstaining from it. These themes varied in magnitude and manifestations between the participants.

### CP Prevents Men from Paying for Sex

Most of the participants in the present study reported that CP prevented or hindered them from paying for sex, and listed various reasons to why and how CP disrupted their ability to pay for sex. The most common reason that participants cited for refraining from SFP was the risk of being infected. Although MWPWS regularly risk their health when paying for sex to a certain extent (Jones et al., 2015), the fear of contracting STD was hardly discussed in the pre-CP original interviews. However, perhaps the unknown nature of COVID-19 makes it appear more threatening than other sexually transmitted diseases (Shilo & Mor, 2020), as one participant stated: "Almost every STD has a cure. There are no guarantees [when you pay for sex], but you tell yourself 'At least I know that if something happens, it can be treated'" (Oron). Several participants underlined the severity of the health risk imposed by COVID-19 by comparing it with the upcoming legal risks from Israel's newly passed law that criminalizes MWPWS: "Getting a fine for paying a sex worker is one thing—but risking your life is a whole different thing" (Sasha).

While some participants ascribed their fear to the unknown nature of CP, others attributed it to the unreliable nature of WPS, and other MWPWS: "*You don't know if someone sick has visited her before you did—because some people aren't careful, and I don't know if she checks their*

*temperature and makes them wear a facemask"* (Efi). Participants also refrained from SFP due to the fear of risking others: "*I considered doing it [paying for sex] but since my ex-wife has a heart condition and is at high risk, and I meet her and our daughters regularly, I definitely wouldn't do it"* (Gabi). Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned the risk of infecting WPS with COVID-19 as a reason to refrain from SFP—suggesting that some MWPWS only worry about the health condition of WPS when it puts them at risk.

Another popular reason to refrain from SFP was financial: some participants cited the economic crisis and their own impaired finances as reasons to avoid SFP. For example, Sasha, who feared he might be fired from his job, explained: "*I'm just not in the mood to spend any money when I don't know what the future holds for me.*" Sasha subsequently admitted that he did eventually book a session with a woman he regularly paid for sex, after refraining from SFP for several weeks. However, on second thought he decided to cancel it, for fear of being fined for violating the general lockdown.

The government's track-and-tracing of people, in an effort to monitor the spread of the virus, posed a further risk to those who prefer to keep their involvement in SFP secret—as Menachem, a religious 33-year-old married man, said:

*It does scare me a little bit [getting sick], but mostly I'm afraid that if— God forbid—I catch COVID-19, you know, they will publish my movement history. I mean, it's much scarier to get caught [as a man who pays for sex] than to have COVID-19. For sure, no doubt about it.*

As a married Orthodox Jewish man, Menachem knew that if his SFP activities became more widely known, they would most likely wreck his marriage, and jeopardize his respectable standing in the community. For him, these repercussions were not hypothetical, but real and even worse than the risk of being infected with COVID-19—suggesting that for some MWPWS, the social stigma surrounding SFP, and the fear of being labeled as someone who engages in it, are so powerful (Weitzer, 2018) that they can even trump certain health risks. However, apart from Menachem, other participants were not particularly troubled by the possibility that their involvement in SFP might be exposed due to the CP monitoring policy. This might call into question the effectiveness of the criminalization policy, since some MWPWS appear not to be deterred by having their SFP activities publicly exposed.

Finally, some participants' considerations to refrain from SFP were nuanced, and involved various health-related, financial, legal and situational factors. Thus for example, Ro'i, a 22-year-old unemployed man who lives with his father across the street from a major street-based prostitution venue, explained:

*A few days ago I was coming back from the market, and I saw this beautiful Russian girl [WPS] and I thought about asking her [if I can pay her to have sex], but because it's on my block and in my neighborhood, and there are tons of cops here, and my dad lives with me, and my room has no door, and he [my dad] doesn't work or go out at all, and I really can't afford it, I just decided to pass.*

### CP Imposes Sexual, Emotional, and Financial Difficulties on MWPWS

Participants in the present study talked about the sexual, emotional, and financial difficulties that derived from their inability to pay for sex, as well as from their unusual SFP experiences during CP. Several participants described their sexual urges, which they usually fulfill through SFP. Nati, a 24-year-old single man, discussed his intensified and disturbing sexual needs, particularly during the quarantine:

*I get up in the morning, I drink my coffee and relax a bit, and I start to plan my day. While I drink my coffee, I surf the web, ok? Like, I dunno— sport sites, gaming, and stuff like that. All of a sudden, I start thinking about sex. I see a picture of some sexy woman, or whatever [...] and I can't focus on anything else. I get these erections and it bothers me, so I tell myself "Ok, just get it over with quickly"—but then I start [masturbating] and it keeps me busy all day long [...] The fact that [before CP] I interacted with people, I talked to people, or even the thought that technically, I could have had sex with someone [if I wanted to], because there were no restrictions and no CP—that thought alone made me less horny. But now I don't even have the opportunity [to interact with people]. It's like, I have no chance of having anything [any kind of sexual interactions], and so it makes me hornier all the time.*

Nati's sexual urges and frequent masturbation were evident in his original pre-CP interview. However, the lack of daily routine, and the lack of interactions with women, appeared to increase his sexual needs to the extreme, undermining his ability to focus on his duties, and compromising his well-being. Such uncomfortable sexual experiences were also evident in other interviews, in which participants defined themselves as sex addicts, and discussed their inability to pay for sex in terms of withdrawal symptoms. While this is not an argument that SFP is the solution for men with pronounced and unsatisfied sexual urges, or who suffer from a sex addiction, this finding demonstrates how dominant SFP is in some men's sexual lives.

In addition, participants talked about the emotional strain brought on by the lack of ability to pay for sex during CP. As previously noted, MWPWS often pay for sex in search for

intimacy (Jones & Hannem, 2018). Accordingly, some of the participants in the present study, who normally relieve their loneliness through SFP, experienced emotional difficulties during CP:

*I miss talking to someone—especially a woman [emphasis in original], not a man. I miss it, yes, I'd like to meet the Asian girl [a WPS he regularly meets] not just for sex, I want to talk to her, ask her how she's doing, and hold her, stuff like that. [...] I want to hug her, talk to her, and have some human interaction. The only interaction I've had in the past month is when I went to the grocery store (Sasha, 36-year-old single man).*

Participants' emotional difficulties did not derive solely from their inability to pay for sex, but were also related to the changed dynamics in their interactions with WPS during CP. Tom, for example, a 38-year-old single man, traveled to Vietnam during CP, accompanied by a local WPS whom he had known for several months before CP. When the pandemic emerged, Tom and his SFP partner found themselves "stuck" with each other—which, according to Tom, turned their casual paid encounters into a paid relationship. He no longer paid his partner directly every time they had sex, but covered all her expenses, and fully supported her financially. During the interview, Tom wondered whether their relationship could still be discussed in terms of SFP, or whether they had morphed into a "normal couple zone." His musings over their uncertain new relationship put Tom in some emotional difficulties, as it upset him every time his SFP partner raised any financial issues:

*For example, when she says she'll have to go back to Thailand to work [in prostitution], or that she doesn't want to borrow money from me, because she doesn't want to owe me anything—all this kind of stuff, all these issues [she brings up] after we've been together for two months, it can really upset me [...] Every time she brings it up, or talks about it, it alienates me.*

While Tom's experience is unique, it highlights meaningful aspects of how the experiences of MWPWS can vary in the era of CP. Although MWPWS often look for a *girl-friend experience* (Huff, 2011), and perhaps achieve it to the full extent under CP restrictions, this can cause them emotional difficulties. This lends support to the contention that some MWPWS prefer to keep only the façade of a romantic relationship with WPS (Kong, 2015). Either way, it demonstrates that the boundaries between a mercenary and an intimate relationship within SFP are not rigid (Sanders, 2008), and can get even blurrier during CP.

Few participants discussed their fear of the economic repercussions CP will have on their future SFP experiences.

Some of them worried that their leverage as customers will diminish, since fellow MWPWS will be so eager to pay for sex, and the sex industry will become “a sellers’ market.” Other participants argued the opposite, suggesting that WPS will be so desperate for work that rates will drop, and MWPWS will have the advantage, as buyers. Relatedly, some participants also raised the economic impact of closed (international) borders policy on their future SFP experiences. They feared SFP prices would rise in the Israeli market, since foreign WPS (who usually charge less) won’t be able to enter the country. Participants who often travel abroad to engage in sex tourism worried that this option may be closed to them indefinitely, and that by having to pay for sex in Israel they would lose the powerful position they usually hold in SFP encounters, especially in developing countries. Overall, irrespective of whether they had a positive or negative future financial scenario, participants were mostly concerned about the unknown consequences of CP on the local and global sex industry, and the unpredictable ways in which it might impair their commercial (sexual) experiences.

Finally, several participants discussed the multiple difficulties they experience by avoiding SFP during CP—demonstrating the nuanced nature of their experiences, which involves various inseparable needs, urges, and desires, which co-exist and alternate:

*I need the [physical] contact; I need the intimacy, the connection. Sometimes I just need the feeling of sex. It varies—it’s like a kind of star [sic], where sometimes the [need for] intimacy is more prominent, and sometimes the sex is more attractive—you know what I mean?” (Efi, 50, single).*

### CP Enables Positive Changes to Men’s SFP Experiences

Despite the various difficulties brought on by CP to the participants’ SFP experiences, several participants also described it as an opportunity for positive change. In particular, they noted their diminished need to pay for sex; how the physical constraints of CP have actually improved their SFP experiences; and their hope that CP will have a positive impact on prostitution policy in Israel.

Firstly, several participants noted how being denied social interactions and social events had reduced their sexual and emotional distress. Thus, for example, unlike participants who felt increased sexual urges during CP, Gabi, a 53-year-old divorced man, noted how his sexual libido had diminished, especially during quarantine:

*I don’t go out as much—so I feel less aroused. I have fewer options, so I don’t feel the FOMO—the fear of*

*missing out—where everybody is having fun, and I’m the only one missing it, and it drives me crazy. Normally, that’s part of what motivates me to purchase intimacy or to purchase sex. [Now] I just sit around all day, and I’m less... anyway, I don’t go out, and I don’t meet anyone anyway. It’s not like I meet someone, or try to talk to a woman or try to hit on her, or any of that stuff that usually gets me turned on—and then I have to unload it somehow. All of this stuff simply doesn’t happen now—so everything is calmer.*

Gabi attributed his relaxed and positive experience to his lack of interactions with women, as well as to the lack of FOMO, which freed him from feeling like someone who has failed in fulfilling his sexuality. This supports the suggestion that some SFP experiences of MWPWS are strongly related to their wish to display masculine potency (Prior & Peled, [submitted for publication B](#)). Moreover, while the lack of interactions with women intensified some participants’ sexual urges (as previously noted), it had the opposite effect on other participants—demonstrating that the experiences of MWPWS are diverse, and sometimes even contradictory.

Participants also spoke about CP as an opportunity to reevaluate their need to pay for sex, and to reconsider their involvement in it:

*Paying for sex is not a necessity—it’s like a treat, a sort of gift that I give myself, a kind of recreation. Maybe I don’t need this pat on the ego anymore, this boost to my self-esteem for “scoring” again. I’ve already been there, done that (...) so why not save all my [sexual] energy, my horniness, my sexual drive, for my partner? Why shouldn’t she be the only one to enjoy it? (Ronen, 50, in a long-term relationship).*

Like Ronen, other participants stated that SFP is only a recreation, one which they are willing to give up. Interestingly, most of these participants had expressed very different views in their original pre-CP interviews, in which they described their engagement in SFP in terms of essential sexual, intimate, and masculine needs, which they must fulfill. Oron, a 44-year-old married man, spoke about his reformed attitude toward SFP and explained:

*I think many things were ‘an issue’ before CP and they are not anymore. You have no choice (...) [sex] is still a basic need but again, it’s a basic need which is also kind of a recreation. If you take two basic needs, like food and sex, so without sex you can live, but without food you cannot live.*

Oron’s experience demonstrates that CP may allow some MWPWS to self-reflect over their involvement in SFP, and perhaps even make them redefine their priorities. This



suggests that CP can have long-term effects on the experiences and behaviors of some MWPWS, as discussed further below.

Secondly, few participants suggested that the physical restrictions imposed by CP actually enhance their SFP experience. Efi for example, a 50-year-old single man, insisted that the WPS he encountered wear a facemask—even though she was reluctant to do so—and described her facemask as upgrading his experience:

*As I walked in, I saw she wasn't wearing a mask, so I asked her about it and she said "It's OK." We went inside, and I told her that I prefer her to wear a mask—so she did (breathing heavily). Actually it was better this way, because I didn't have to see her face. I've noticed that with their facemasks on, women are much prettier. (Efi, 50, single).*

Efi's description suggests that the SFP experience for some MWPWS is mostly about their own gratification—to the extent of ignoring the WPS's preferences, and regarding them as nothing more than bodily parts designed to fulfil their clients' sexual gratification.

Finally, several participants were excited about the positive legal consequences CP might have, inasmuch as it might postpone the impending implementation of the new law that criminalizes the clients of prostitution. Even if the law does take effect as planned, they argued, it will not be fully enforced: *"There probably won't be strict enforcement, as there is now with the roadblocks, and the police everywhere. I doubt the police would even attempt to enforce it"* (Roman). This perception suggests that the criminalization of MWPWS may be less productive in the current context of CP, since some MWPWS question its enforcement.

### CP Is Insignificant to the Sex-for-Pay Experiences of MWPWS

Lastly, several participants argued that, although CP temporarily prevented them from paying for sex, imposed some difficulties or led to positive changes, its overall impacts on their experiences in SFP are insignificant. Thus, almost all of them argued that the sex industry will eventually go back to operate much as it did before CP:

*They [WPS] might want to check your temperature before you come in—but other than that, they will still need the money. Everybody's talking about the disastrous ramifications of CP—but eventually life goes on, things will go back to the way they were before. (Sasha).*

Relatedly, Ronen suggested that even if he is forced to take precautions when paying for sex, his experience will remain the same:

*If tomorrow morning they tell me "Listen, you have to wear a facemask and gloves, and you can't take them off, that's the only way we'll serve you, are you up for it, yes or no?" I will go for it. [...] No one and nothing can stop sex buyers and sex sellers [speaking assertively]. They will always find each other—always. Where there is a market, there are buyers and there is goods, no matter what.*

Like Sasha and Ronen, some participants also described CP restrictions as insignificant not only to their future SFP experiences, but also to their present SFP experiences. Describing his latest SFP experience during CP, Roman, a 38-year-old single man, stressed that the facemasks were irrelevant—especially since kissing is usually anyway out of the sexual repertoire in SFP:

*Most of them don't kiss anyway; most of the time they don't kiss anyway. [...] It felt the same. Well, maybe the mask was a bit intimidating, maybe it bothered me a bit, but the sexual act was exactly the same.*

Overall, the findings suggest that CP and its attendant restrictions have varying or even contradictory implications on multiple aspects of MWPWS experiences of SFP, or lack of them. The meanings of these findings for future studies and SFP policy will be further discussed.

## Discussion

In recent months, we have experienced one of the most severe global crises of the century. We still far from understanding how this aggressive pandemic and its massive social and economic implications will shape human behavior in the foreseeable or distant future, but it is already reasonable to assume that it will have profound and radical ramifications. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to empirically examine the experiences of MWPWS during CP. The following sections discuss this study's contribution to the existing body of knowledge about MWPWS, to other related research domains, and to prostitution policy.

### The Contributions to the Study of MWPWS

The findings indicate that the participants' SFP experiences during CP were diverse, or even contradictory. While some of them have struggled with the health risks and the social distancing restrictions on their sexual and intimate interactions, others view CP as a welcome opportunity to ease up on their relentless attempts to meet social, and especially gendered, expectations. Relatedly, some participants have come to acknowledge that SFP plays a dominant role in their sexual lives—more than they initially thought it did—while others are relieved to find that they are able to be content

without paying for sex. Since CP, several participants have reflected and reconsidered their SFP practices—however, others believe that the impact of CP on their SFP experiences has been insignificant. The findings also demonstrate how dehumanizing attitudes and behaviors of MWPWS toward WPS are uniquely expressed during CP. Overall, this suggests that the experiences of MWPWS are non-monolithic and are shaped both by inner urges and desires, and by multiple social discourses (Prior & Peled, [submitted for publication B](#)). It also supports the recent criticism of the polarized and simplistic points of departure that has characterized much of the research on MWPWS, and underlines the need to diversify our understanding of MWPWS (Birch, 2015; Peled et al., 2020).

Another key novel contribution of this study is in its highlighting of the value of studying the experiences of MWPWS in retrospect—or even when they are “on a break” from engaging in SFP. Almost all the participants in the present study stated that they partially or fully abstained from SFP during quarantine. Nonetheless, even their experiences of abstaining from SFP yield significant insights into the role SFP plays in their lives, and the meanings they attribute to it. This demonstrates that valuable knowledge about MWPWS can also be gained from studying men who used to pay for sex, but are no longer doing so on a regular basis, or at all. In light of the difficulty in recruiting MWPWS for such studies (Huysamen, 2019), this finding offers new possibilities for future studies in this domain.

### The Contributions for Sexuality and Masculinity Research

The findings of the present study support the contention that CP affects peoples’ sexual urges, behaviors, and experiences in different, and even contradictory, ways (e.g., Jacob et al., 2020; Panzeri et al., 2020). They also suggest that CP’s effects on peoples’ sexual experiences and urges may extend beyond their inability to engage in certain sexual relations, or to avoid specific sexual acts. For example, some participants in the present study reported profound changes in their sexual drive and sexual desires, which they ascribed to CP. As some of them noted, these changes may remain after social isolations or other social restrictions are no longer enforced. This suggests that CP’s effects on human sexuality and sexual experiences may be radical and long-lasting—especially since CP is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Hence, the present study underlines the importance of researching CP not only as a temporal or mild disturbance to people’s sexual lives. Rather, future sexuality studies should consider the long-term and profound ramifications CP has on human sexuality and sexual relations.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that CP and the ensuing enforced social isolation have been perceived by some participants as an opportunity to re-assess their need to perform certain masculine practices—especially those related to sexual potency. This is relevant to the understanding of gendered identities, and in particular to how masculinity is construed, during CP beyond the context of SFP. “Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p.836). Thus, the inability to socialize with male associates, and the various social settings of isolation and social distancing imposed by CP, may change masculinity norms, practices, and performances. This preliminary hypothesis should be further explored, but points to the significance of studying gendered identities and social norms in times of dramatic social change.

### The Implications for Prostitution Policy

Participants’ SFP experiences during CP have possible implications for short- and long-term prostitution policy. Firstly, policymakers should be guided by current studies that look at social behavior during CP, since social reality is changing rapidly in these times, and policies should be adjusted quickly and adequately. Thus, for example, although practices of objectification and exploitation are already evident in the literature on MWPWS (e.g., Jovanovski & Tyler, 2018), new expressions of these perceptions were found in the present study. This highlights the vulnerability of WPS—especially in view of the severe financial hardship they have suffered during CP (Döring, 2020). Hence, the study underlines the significance of developing practical and context-driven prostitution policy (Huschke, 2017; Pitcher, 2019)—such as ad-hoc social interventions aimed at reducing aspects of exploitation that sometimes plague the SFP phenomenon, and may be on the rise during CP.

Secondly, as previously noted, the findings indicate that the various changes that CP has imposed on the experiences of MWPWS may motivate some MWPWS to reconsider the role SFP plays in their lives, and their ability (or inability) to be sexually and emotionally satisfied without it. In my view, some MWPWS may benefit from the opportunity that events such as CP have provided them to reflect on the significance and repercussions that SFP has for them. Such reflective processes, however, are often difficult, and may require professional support. Accordingly, I suggest that prostitution policy should also include the allocation of professional resources to help MWPWS manage their sexual and emotional difficulties. I therefore add my voice to those who

criticize prostitution policies that are reduced solely to legal measures and diversion programs, which view MWPWS as offenders or addicts (Gurd & O'Brien, 2013; Huschke & Coetzee, 2020). Whether they are criminalized or not, offering MWPWS social and therapeutic support instead of only re-educating, rehabilitating or ignoring them is even more important now, given the growing challenges posed by CP. Moreover, it may also contribute to reducing aspects of exploitation, such as those described earlier.

Finally, in the Israeli context, in which diversion programs (“Johns schools”) for MWPWS are presently being planned, I hope the findings of the present study will encourage policymakers to design diversified and supportive programs for MWPWS, which take into account and address the nuanced experiences of MWPWS. Adding therapeutic elements to these programs may reduce the programs’ “blaming and shaming” aspects (Sanders, 2009), and perhaps make them more suited to the needs of MWPWS.

### Limitations and Direction for Future Studies

This study explored the experiences of a small and heterogeneous sample of 10 MWPWS during CP. While it has produced new understandings, they relate to a small group of participants, and they are bound by context, which affects the transferability of the findings. Participants’ SFP experiences during CP were strongly related to the timeline of CP in Israel, as well as to the currently changing prostitution policy. Accordingly, studying MWPWS experiences during CP under a different prostitution regime, or conducting this study in the context of a restricted or looser enforcement of social distancing, might have produced different understandings. Thus, for example, while the study did not find that participants shifted to purchasing prostitution online during CP, under a more prolonged and stricter quarantine, that might have occurred. This reflects the premise of this naturalistic qualitative study, that only partial and context-bound understanding is possible in any given study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These study attributes underline the need for multiple studies, from various standpoints and contexts, at different stages of CP progressions, and with larger samples, to gain a better understanding of the spectrum of experiences of MWPWS in general, particularly during a prolonged global pandemic.

Methodologically, the use of follow-up interviews highlighted the dynamic and the temporary nature of participants’ experiences. Although this was not the purpose of the study, the analysis suggests that the participants’ current SFP experiences often differed from their pre-CP ones. This underlines the advantages of combining longitudinal approaches—such as serial interviews instead of one-off, “snapshot” ones—to study complex and evolving experiences (Murray et al., 2009). These methods might be

especially helpful when studying nuanced social phenomena and human experiences during the current and still evolving global pandemic.

Finally, the present study of experiences of SFP of Israeli MWPWS during CP suggests that the pandemic and its social derivatives can permeate multiple aspects of the men’s lives, experiences, and interactions, beyond its obvious and immediate health and financial repercussions. The study shows that CP—and in particular, the social distancing it enforces—can trigger diverse sexual, emotional and consumerist experiences. Although it was conducted during the immediate reactions to the outbreak of CP, its findings also point to the long-term effects CP is likely to have on the experiences of MWPWS, and on the sex industry as a whole. Accordingly, it behooves us, as social scientists, to theoretically and empirically explore the immediate and long-lasting impacts of CP on interpersonal interactions and social behavior (Ward, 2020), and I hope that this study will encourage fellow scholars to do so in their own field of research.

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